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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 6274
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 3474
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 3707
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 5378
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: VMOD VARGAS: "WE WILL NOT FIRE ON BOLIVIANS"

REF: LA PAZ 694

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) During a March 27 meeting with PolOff and MILGP Commander, Vice Minister of Defense (recently Armed Forces Commander) Wilfredo Vargas registered disappointment with "the government" for not concluding a peaceful negotiated end to the opposition-GOB standoff. He said the military does not enjoy being in the middle of what is a political stand-off. He referred to the Santa Cruz referendum as illegal and product of the non-elected civic committee, but unequivocally said there will be no military crackdown before or after May 4. "Firing on our own people, forget about it. We will not fire on Bolivians."

12. (C) Vargas said the only military involvement he foresees is separating warring social groups. Vargas said that isolated clashes between supporters of the government and the opposition were inevitable and beyond the control of either side, although both sides will disassociate themselves from the violence.

Santa Cruz is the Big Prize

13. (C) Vargas said the government is not against the "idea of autonomy," only the "key" Santa Cruz referendum, which it considers extreme, undemocratic, and illegal. He commented that the referenda would likely win in Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando, but that the campesino vote in Tarija is being underestimated. He mentioned the government considers Sucre and Cochabamba City as being isolated outposts of opposition surrounded by government supporters in Chuquisaca and Cochabamba departments, respectively. Vargas asserted the government does not feel as threatened about autonomy movements in these two cities because civic movements there are easily contained and safely tucked away in GOB strongholds.

GOB Fear of the Armed Forces

14. (C) Jorge Caballero, Cabinet Director for the Vice

Minister of Foreign Relations, told PolOff April 1 that the government is ultimately afraid of the armed forces and will not push them too hard to intervene in Santa Cruz, least it bite back with a coup. "The government needs the armed forces; the armed forces do not need the government." Caballero said the government will instead maintain a public veneer of military obedience with vague statements by senior leaders in support of the constitution and national unity in order to play on opposition fears of a military crackdown on autonomy efforts. Although Caballero was alarmed about more specific comments made by Armed Forces General Luis Trigo last week that the military would act "very energetically" against "anyone who talks about the disintegration of Bolivia," ultimately he discounted the comments as empty rhetoric. "It's a long way from La Paz to Santa Cruz." Meanwhile, the Morales administration will work on bolstering military loyalty with bribes to its commanders, which Caballero thought was poor strategy, as it breeds contempt in lower ranks.

Retired Officers Sound Off Against Politicized Military Use

¶5. (U) The Bolivian Association of Retired Officers voiced its opposition March 25 to the government's alleged misuse of the military in social roles and its concern about the future use of Venezuelan troops in Bolivian domestic disputes. The association repeated its complaints March 26, elaborating that it had to take a public stand against President Morales' politicized use of the armed forces because "these are things the high command cannot talk about." Association President retired Vice Admiral Waldo Nava urged the high command to tell Morales "this is not our mission."

Comment

¶6. (C) Our DAO, MILGP, and ECOPOL sections are being deluged by calls from active-duty and retired officers. The military rumor mill is spinning out a variety of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory conspiracy theories; everything from a military coup to surgical arrests of opposition leaders to passive-aggressively carving off part of the Media Luna as a 10th department (reftel). We have been clearly indicating that the U.S. Government views democratic means as the only legitimate way to change governments. We find no coherent plan or strategy amidst all these competing conspiracy theories and are urging everyone to respect the constitutional order. A divided and confused government ensures an ad-hoc method of dealing with the opposition's steadfast march to autonomy. The opposition has seized the initiative, inertia rules in a vacuum, and the most likely government reaction remains inaction. Despite the influx of intriguing rumors, we continue to believe sitting it out in their barracks to be the most likely plan of action for the military on May 4. End Comment.
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